The Myth Of Redemptive Violence

LAST UPDATED ON: JULY 23, 2012 AT 7:30 PM **BY SHANE CLAIBORNE** **131 COMMENTS**

I had a veteran friend once tell me, "The biggest lie I have ever been told is that violence is evil, except in war." He went on, "My government told me that. My Church told me that. My family told me that… I came back from war and told them the truth – 'Violence is not evil, except in war… Violence is evil – period'."

Every day it seems like we are bombarded with news stories of violence – a shooting in Colorado, a bus bombing in Bulgaria, drones gone bad and the threat of a nuclear Iran, a civil war in Syria, explosions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

This week's cover story of Time magazine is — "One a Day" — showing that soldier suicides are up to one per day, surpassing the number of soldiers that die in combat. The US military budget is still rising — over 20,000 dollars a second, over 1 million dollars a minute spent on war, even as the country goes bankrupt.

Our world is filled with violence – like a plague, an infection, a pandemic of people killing people, and people killing themselves. In my city of brotherly love, Philadelphia, we have nearly one homicide a day – and in this land of the free we have over 10,000 homicides a year.

Today, Barack Obama called the shooting in Colorado "evil". And he is right.

But perhaps it is also time that we declare that violence is evil, everywhere – period. It's obvious that killing folks in a movie theater is sick and deranged, but the question arises – is violence ever okay?

AD

Our kids keep getting mixed messages. A few years ago there was a national news story about a second grader in Rhode Island who wore a baseball cap to school with soldiers carrying guns on the front. The school authorities ruled that his hat violated dress code, which did not allow for weapons on clothing, a code established with the kids best interest in mind, for their safety and protection. But then school authorities pushed for an exception, working to allow for clothing that had

soldiers with guns, in the interest of promoting “patriotism and democracy.” No wonder our kids are confused by our double-speak. Even for those who believe violence is a necessary evil in our world, maybe there can be a renewed commitment to still call it evil.

Martin Luther King was one of those prophetic voices that insisted that we must challenge the violence of the ghettoes — or those who massacre people in theaters — and we must challenge the violence of our government.

We must not forget that Timothy McVeigh, who committed the worst act of domestic terror in US history, said that he learned to kill in the first Gulf war. It was there that he said he turned into an “animal”. He comes back from war, mentally deranged, and continues to kill. And then the government that trained him to kill, kills him, to show the rest of us that it is wrong to kill. There is something deeply troubling about our logic of redemptive violence.

Even though western evangelical Christianity has not been known for its consistent ethic of life (as it has often been more pro-birth than pro-life, opposing abortion but not always opposing death when it comes to capital punishment, gun

violence, militarism, and poverty), Christianity throughout history has had a powerful critique of violence in all its ugly forms. One of the patriarchs, Cyprian (African Bishop in the third century), critiqued the contradictory view of death so prevalent in our culture where we call killing evil in some instances and noble in others: "Murder, considered a crime when people commit it singly, is transformed into a virtue when they do it en masse."

Contemporary thinkers like Renee Girard contend that this challenge to violence inherent to Christ-like Christianity is, at least in part because, at the center of the Christian faith is a victim of violence — as Jesus was brutally murdered on the cross. And there is a triumph over death as rises from the dead, a final victory over violence and hatred and sin and all ugly things.

And yet, even in the face the evil that Jesus endured, he consistently challenged the myth of redemptive violence. He looked into the eyes of those killing him and called on God to forgive them. He loved his enemies and taught his disciples to do the same. He often said things like, "You've heard it said 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'… but I want to say there is a better way" and "You've heard it said, 'love your friends and hate your enemies'… but I tell you love those who hate you… do

not repay evil with evil’”” He challenges the prevailing logic of his day, and of ours. He insisted that if we “pick up the sword we will die by the sword” – and we’ve learned that lesson all too well.

AD

When one of his disciples picks up a sword to defend him and cuts off a guy’s ear, Jesus scolds his own disciple, picks up the ear, and heals the wounded persecutor. Christian theologians have said Jesus teaches a “third way” to interact with evil. We see a Jesus who abhors both passivity and violence and teaches us a new way forward that is neither submission nor assault, neither fight nor flight. He shows us a way to oppose evil without mirroring it, where oppressors can be resisted without being emulated and neutralized without being destroyed.

We can take courage that Jesus understood the violence of our world, very well. At one point he wept over Jerusalem because it didn’t know the things that make for peace. No doubt Jesus is still weeping.

And lots of us are weeping with him – from Colorado to Kabul. Perhaps it's time for a united, nonviolent assault on the myth of redemptive violence. Perhaps it's time for us to declare that violence is always evil – period. There is always a third way.